

Do young people in Europe drink more responsibly than their United States counterparts?

Many Americans think our youth have higher drinking rates and more alcohol-related problems than youth in Europe. Some will hold up Europe as an example of liberal drinking age laws and attitudes fostering a more responsible style of drinking among their young people.

By 1984, each state and the District of Columbia had raised the drinking age to 21. In Europe, most countries allow beer and wine purchases by anyone age 16 and older. In many places, such as France, drinking starts much earlier, with parents giving their children small amounts of wine at holiday celebrations. Switzerland allows drinking at age 16, Poland and Portugal have no minimum drinking age.¹ What is really happening in European countries with youth drinking—and how does that compare to the United States?

At times it is hard to compare the United States to European countries because there is no common database of information.² However, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and the United States Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF) are closely related. From these surveys of European 15 and 16 years and 10th graders in the United States, we can make some comparisons.

Drinking in the Past 30 Days³

Thirty day drinking rates are often used to indicate current or regular drinkers. Alcohol use among youth is associated with a wide variety of risky behaviors including unprotected sex, vulnerability to coerced sexual activity, use of marijuana and poor academic performance.⁴ With the exception of Croatia, every one of the 21 European countries in the ESPAD survey had higher rates than the U.S. Thirty-nine percent of U.S. and Croatian 10th graders reported that they had a drink in the past 30 days. This is far less than for 10th graders in Denmark (81 percent) and the United Kingdom or Greece (74 percent each).

Five or More Drinks in a Row⁵

Binge drinking, commonly defined as consuming five or more drinks in a row, is associated with increased risk for problems including driving under the influence, fighting, truancy and criminal activities. It is commonly perceived that Europeans are socialized to drink at an earlier age, and because of this they drink more responsibly. But, the truth of

the matter is, surveys show higher rates of binge drinking among European youth than U.S. youth. Only Portugal (at 14 percent) is lower than the US (at 24 percent). The US is lower than Italy (31 percent), Greece (33 percent), and Spain (39 percent)—with Denmark showing the highest rate at 61 percent of 15 and 16 year olds binge drinking.

Intoxication⁶

Intoxication is also associated with a wide variety of personal and social problems. If more liberal policies toward drinking in Europe lead to more a responsible drinking style, one would expect to find lower intoxication rates. The U.S. is higher than some countries (Portugal, Cyprus, Greece), lower than others (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, United Kingdom) and essentially equivalent to others (Italy, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia).

From these three alcohol consumption categories, there is no evidence that European young people drink more responsibly than U.S. youth. A greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries report drinking in the past 30 days, a majority of countries have a greater percentage of youth drinking five or more drinks in a row, and about half the countries had higher rates reported for intoxication.

Beneath headlines of tragedies related to underage alcohol are circumstances filled with heartache. Yet as these statistics illustrate, United States laws and policies do make a difference.

Sources cited:

¹Richburg, K. "European Laws Place Emphasis on the Driving, Not the Drinking." Downloaded from www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A35079-2004Dec29?language=printer on 1/3/05.

²Ibid

³Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Comparison of Drinking Rates and Problems: European Countries and the United States," February, 2001.

⁴National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. 1997. "Youth Drinking: Risk Factors and Consequences." Alcohol Alert No 37. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa37.htm>.

⁵Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Comparison of Drinking Rates and Problems: European Countries and the United States," February, 2001.

⁶Ibid.



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